

UMD Project Management Symposium Building a World Class Team

Timothy W. Ortiz, Program Manager Director, SAIC

438 Cross Creek Drive, Huntingtown, MD 20639; zistro0101@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

An organization's success depends on the one resource that is a fully functioning response and in an anticipatory state of readiness, its people. The team that must be formed, and able to work together and advance the levels of talent and expertise requires leadership which knows what a world class team looks like, sounds like, how they communicate and most of all know why they are the team.

Team building is an essential practice for the program manager, requiring a strategic adaptation not only at the beginning of the project, but continuously re-evaluating, exemplifying the best of the team, cultivating the potential and managing the team dynamic.

The practice has essential elements, starting with vision. Too little value is placed on vision by teams and this presentation will make the point of vision as a more tangible and self guiding focus for the team.

A second team building element is the built in overhead of team effort to efficiently perform but to also prepare themselves and rely on the program investment in the team to extend their talent as outreach and demonstration.

A third element among more that will be covered in this presentation is the team makeup, considering both talent and personality. The techniques for position announcement, interviews, expectations, evaluations and feedback, and team structure will be discussed as leadership tasks towards building the world class team.

You are invited to examine your leadership role as a team builder and the practices to make yourself the most effective enabler for your program's success.

A Project Manager's most important responsibility and most time-consuming effort is building teams. The Project wide team is typically built with the aid of other leads on the team, however, the direct team reporting to the Project Manager is hers alone. The best possible team is not easily assembled, while entirely functional and can perform at acceptable levels, a world class team build is a monumental exercise.

As a Program Manager for over fifteen years, leading NASA teams for developing and maintaining a hardware/software system which ingests earth observing, satellite-based instrument data, I had the opportunity as a Program Manager to build such a team. The NASA customer evaluates the program every six months and provides scoring which has been earned through the performance of the team. One such evaluation included a statement by the NASA official that the mission was executed by "a world class team." The objective as a Program Manager was to build the most effective and empowering team for NASA, so reading this statement revealed the achievement after a twenty-five out of a current forty-two year career.

Having worked with any high performing team as a rare instance, most Project Managers will often state how lucky they felt to have been a part of the team. I have spent much time thinking about what it means to be lucky. If luck were associated with rewards and advantages, then how would one increase one's luck? I came across a definition of luck that answered this question for me. "Definition of luck – when preparation meets opportunity – Anonymous." Clearly then if I increased my preparation and then took advantage of every opportunity, my luck would increase. I have taken this to be my mantra in life and have seen many rewards and leveraged advantages. As a Program Manager and in the constant effort of building teams, I applied the luck definition and have built out practices of wide preparation and always seeking opportunity.

Here is a real life example when I was lucky. I was lucky to survive multiple motorcycle crashes as a full-time motorcycle commuter. After working a night shift, it was a winter night and I had to open the manual choke on the engine to start. The ride was at a slight decline into a valley with no reason to downshift until one elbow curve in town. Upon approach of the curve, I downshifted, but since the choke was still open, the motorcycle unexpectedly revved up and took off past the turn. I relied on practiced maneuver to dump the motorcycle, but when do I make the move? Too early, I would tumble on rough terrain, too late I would be decapitated by a low guy wire. I calculated the escape vector, held on some milliseconds and then dumped the motorcycle, bending into a tuck and rolled. Was I lucky? I had been prepared by having practiced dumping a motorcycle, I found the right opportunity to make the maneuver at the right location. Can you be lucky to get a highly competitive job of your dreams? The preparation of the right experience, education and focus on hire-ability is brought to an opportunity of monitoring employers for growth and having a likeable interview. Building a world class team requires a Project Manager's continual preparation and constructing the opportunity to attract and keep talent. This paper presents the elements of practice for a Project Manager to build a world class team, from the tenets of preparation and opportunity – luck.

The preparation of a world class team is a simple set of behavior skills which defines what a world class team would look like. With a client to serve, the team member has to be completely accessible through several means and being direct with the client to say "The best way to contact me is", and to always answer the call. One most often repeated positive review by a client is how responsive the team member is to requests. This behavior will distinguish an individual from others more often than the effort

requires.

Listening skills are the most powerful asset a team member can have, but to also promote listening opportunities by being attentive. Attentiveness is achieved through engagement both formal and casual. Sincerity and a genuine interest in a client are one of the most difficult requirements of a world class team as it means some measure of vulnerability. Separate from the basics of listening skills, including; avoiding interruption, making direct eye contact, nodding acknowledgement, and taking notes shows the team member has heard and captured the message. A good practice during listening is to make it a goal to formulate questions, even if for background or interest sake. This goes a long way to start building a relationship where the team member demonstrates they care.

The team member takes a position that there is more to the job than fulfilling what the job function requires, but what is required for the customer relationship. This relationship building means maintaining interest in helping the client look good. Preparation of the client relationship readies the team for any opportunity requiring trust due to having paved the path to accessibility and readiness to respond. A client will turn to the team that relates to their goals and objectives, demonstrating common understanding and a ready position to provide a solution.

A narrow view of team members who resort to the “that’s not my job” excuse, only serve to negatively impact the cohesiveness of the team. A prepared team will have staff who are quick to fill any observed gap in performance by anyone on the team. This supports a transparency where the client only sees the objective being met without knowing how the team adjusted to the need.

The common term to try to distinguish a team is innovation. This claim to being innovative is suffering fatigue and only applies to a practice of improvements. The Project Manager can prepare the team for imaginative thought and to dare to advance toward what would have been impossible and seed the client’s mind to create rather than modify.

The preparation to be client oriented and to practice this as a core skill takes the team to a level of performance that sets the culture for the team. The client is not only the paying client, but each member of the team is a client. Applying the same service to the teammate elevates and broadens the team as an organization of complete awareness and connected as a network of performers.

The Project Manager fills in the world class team through hires. The basic job description is not reviewed in the interview as the ultimate qualifying criteria, but the challenge is to present the job as the opportunity available to the candidate. The Project Manager addresses the talent application by explaining why what the candidate is going to do is important. Often, the interview lacks the background explanation and misses the opportunity for the candidate to visualize the greater enterprise and where they would fit. Presenting the opportunity where the objective for the candidate would become qualified and primed for their next job can be an option of high interest. The opportunity to receive real-time mentoring, receiving adjustment suggestions and tuning tips will quickly reveal demonstrated results. The team member, as a lead, will have ownership with autonomy, able to make important decisions, build their own teams and take the same approaches of the Project Manager to their teams.

The Project Manager encourages opportunities for the team member to get the most visibility time in with all stakeholders. This affords the opportunity to showcase leadership and representation of the team’s efforts. This also allows for the direct client relationship to occur through frequent interaction.

A final discussion with the candidate is the opportunity to have access to strategic discussion and be mentored in the process of increasing value and growth. The access to mature knowledge and proven experience is a rare feature but ensures world class quality.

The personal qualifications a Project Manager looks for in potential world class candidates include being process advocates and demonstrate an innate quality emphasis with their performance, as well as of others. Having had lessons learned from lack of process and weak quality standards allows for advocacy with the client and teammates. Soft skills are important and while there are so many that are espoused, one behavior can collectively validate a mastery of soft skills, and that is asking for feedback. Demonstrating a desire to improve and a readiness to adapt requires all the ancillary soft skills to make this happen.

A world class team member is inspirational in thought and action. To imagine the successful outcome and putting personal energy into an expressive and positive possibility with excitement is contagious.

Finding a candidate that will credit the team and avoid taking personal credit is important to the function of the entire team. The scrutiny of the behavior of the team leads is observable not only by the team, but the client as well. While pride can be demonstrated, it should be for the team's accomplishments.

The process for developing a product includes, understanding the client needs, developing requirements, building a design and developing the product with simulation, testing and valid data inputs. The candidate should be able to identify risks across the entire process, document and monitor and be courageous in elevating risks.

Finally, while a soft skill, it cannot be overemphasized how important the ability to mingle, generate conversation, approach cold calls, and take advantage of making connections and building network is to add leverage to the team's outreach.

The world class team masters the skill of listening. This is more than just paying attention, there are more complex underlying elements to listening. Listening is viewed as an opportunity and requires assessment and strategic thought to make listening the active execution of performance. The team member has to quickly evaluate the listening window, the duration of the listening opportunity to map out techniques to get the message completely. Observing the cadence of the speaking and determining whether there will be multiple points presented, or one and the possible pause points to interject questions builds an early assessment of the best approach to balance listening and asking questions.

Depending on the amount of information being heard, some control for the rhythm of the conversation may be necessary and is a required skill of the team member. This is a subtle manipulation which is part of the consultative skills the world class team members possess.

In order to have the speaker feel the listener is engaged and actively listening, the simple gestures of nodding frequently and repeating back what was heard validates the speaker. This can be observed during the interview with the candidate. A further observation is in note taking, the keywords that appear as important to the speaker would be noted and referred again in the conversation.

The world class team member can filter out the nuisance talk and find gems in the conversation that reveal perceived problems, hint at worries and key off "nice to have" statements to develop into future opportunities.

The daily practices which become habit for the team member include capturing information, what was heard and keep validating by echoing back in verse and text.

This is the re-tain to re-serve approach. Immediately sending acknowledgement of receipt of all email, limiting the email chain provides positive responses and lack of delay in resolving issues. Another strong habit is to keep a journal and organize the entries using indexing, keywords and representative doodles. A unique habit and inherent thought process are to constantly seek what defines “What does success look like?” Probing the stakeholders to navigate to this end is a mark of world class distinction. Most companies have a values statement which define the structure of the expected behavior of the team. The world class team demonstrates these values by identifying opportunities to play out the values, promote them with attention and document them in performance reviews.

One facet of the world class team is the use of vision in an effective manner to guide progress. Historically, leaders feel obligated to create a vision statement, but tends to be a cut and paste exercise, canned to fill the space, and done by the obligatory stuckee. The vision statement is presented and displayed on a powerpoint chart and on the webpage but is not heard spoken outwardly as part of the team vernacular.

The Project Manager of a world class team constantly returns to the vision statement as the guideline during execution. Vision is communicated as a visual impression and something that is tangible and physically performed. A vision is a direct result of the finished program deliverable and representative of the effort to do so.

One instance when I worked for the Department of Labor, I built a team that would finally migrate a system from a mainframe to servers. Previous companies had failed. I briefed the team on expectations and described a vision of having a celebratory party where there would be a scaled-down model of the mainframe and we would be giving the government manager a hammer and watch her destroy the mainframe model. Not only did the team deliver ahead of schedule and under budget, then the hammer went flying and left a pile of splinters. The vision realized.

Here are sample real life vision statements, can you determine which company they belong?

- To help people and businesses throughout the world realize their full potential.
- **“for every person to use their unique experiences and backgrounds, together – to spark solutions that create a better, healthier world.”**
- To be earth’s most customer centric company; to build a place where people can come to find and discover anything, they might want to buy online.
- Will lead the future mobility society, enriching lives around the world with the safest and most responsible ways of moving people. Through our commitment to quality, ceaseless innovation, and respect for the planet, we strive to exceed expectations and be rewarded with a smile.

These are the vision statements from Apple, Johnson & Johnson, Amazon and Toyota, respectively.

One of the first things to occur between the Project Manager and the team is to discuss expectations. This lays the basis of understanding of the relationship with the Project Manager and where to meet or exceed expectations during execution. The first expectation is to accept and practice empowerment. The team member is responsible for further team building and making decisions, owns the plan and the budget and is expected to beat schedule and perform under budget and use surplus for overachievement. The expectation to own problems and use all resources available to resolve and only when the only last measure is to get the Project Manger involved, the team can plan for intervention. The team member is expected to keep the pulse of the

morale of the team, organize team building, lead by example in participation of employee events. Remembering that people are THE asset and must be well taken care. Any client concerns are taken seriously and handled expeditiously. The world class team always has a plan B, and has means to develop get well plans, if needed. To communicate effectively, the team must think about communication in terms of the receiver not the sender. To claim communication occurred, is flawed as describing it as a message being sent. The true evidence of successful communication is in the receipt of the communication and the correct understanding of the communication.

Risk identification is an important expectation of the team and should be heard in every solution conversation. The risk statements should include the condition of the circumstances, the action that may occur and the impact. The likelihood of the condition being met should also be well communicated. Further, the following re-planning should already be discussed and considered for any additional resources. When allocating time to discuss status of events such as a daily status meeting, time allocated for risk discussion should be included.

The more recent management technique of failing forward really elevates what I have always attributed to the strength of American engineering. Throughout the academic journey and any competitive activity, we have subtly been expected to accept failure as a part of the learning experience. While there is no programmed fear of failure, cost pressures do not encourage failing scenarios as a part of product development. I have always planned for failure and right off the top, reserve budget to expend on failure recovery. The world class team knows that it can fail and still have support to recover, thus performing fearlessly, or failing forward.

Given the expectations above, the team can also expect constant feedback. Upon joining the team one of the first things that the Project Manager talks to the team member about is to expect to get feedback real-time. The team member knows some adjustment is needed and talked about immediately after an event, when the Project Manager says, "Can you come see me, I have some feedback?" The soft skill for the Project Manager is not to make the adjustment personal, but to talk through the situation and possible appropriate responses. The Project Manager can express any concern with "I felt like"

The Project Manager is always monitoring choice of words, decision results, and behavior. One phrase, often heard and corrected is when a lead says, "Hopefully we will deliver on time," or "I am hoping to make it work." This is an opportunity to adjust the thinking process towards a highly confident plan. The Project Manager response to this should be "We are not paid to hope."

Another flag in the word choice is saying "No," especially to the client. The answer should always be "Yes <,but>" to the client. While the first reaction may be "No" for all obvious reasons, but there is room for the not so obvious. Saying "Yes, but...>" allows for negotiation lead in.

Feedback in the form of speaking to consultative skills helps a team member grow with real world experience. Consultative skills are techniques to engender customer trust and likeability, reading and expressing body language and role acting. The Project Manager must be the expert at consultative skills to groom the team.

While focus so far has been on the team, there is the Project Manager who really is the Leader. This is a role, which most of the skills as a leader can feel natural and some learned. The world class team includes the world class leader which encompasses multiple and unique roles. This includes being the Enabler, having authority and influence and license to remove obstacles for the team. Further, examining how

bureaucratic processes and procedure can be a distraction and alleviating these from the team. The Visionary is the voice that tells the team WHY what they are doing is important. The Strategist designs the future path with a series of winning tactics using the talent, budget and growth opportunities. The Evangelist advocates for the team and the mission, maintaining momentum on the circular achievement of increased capability from new opportunity to increase capability. The Last Responder in being approached with issues that could not be resolved by the rest of the team and always leaning forward towards the positive win-win result. Given the challenges of the last-minute problems, making decisions without hesitation. Assurance to the team of thoroughness and full consideration by listening to both sides of stories.

The Project Manager must be bold with encouraging can-do attitude, courageous in addressing her own fear and challenging others' fear, an actor is playing out the roles separate from their true self, but anchored by their true self-belief, very approachable with sincere gratitude for any dialogue, being able to handle the loneliness at work as perceptions can go viral and be tireless as if each encounter is the most important.

Do you feel lucky enough to be on my world class team? I would be lucky to have you.

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